

Foreword

Jeremy Thompson

There I was at the heart of the Union Buildings just metres away from Nelson Mandela as he delivered his iconic “rainbow nation” speech. “Let freedom reign,” he declared. The date was 10 May 1994. I paused for a moment to remind myself that this is why I had become a journalist. For a day just like this. To be at the epicentre of the biggest story on earth. The day that apartheid officially ended and South Africa welcomed its first black president.



A moment of history to which I was an eyewitness. It confirmed my deep belief that it is a privilege to be a journalist, to be offered a front row seat on history, to be given the honour and duty to convey events with candour and integrity, with fairness and impartiality to the many millions who could not be there. I have always seen it as my basic job to provide the factual raw material, the information on which others can shape their views and opinions. It is not for me to comment or conclude. It's just for me to be there and relay the scene with clarity. A few weeks before that momentous day in Pretoria, I interviewed

Mandela in his Robben Island cell on the fourth anniversary of his release from prison. In that cramped space, he reminded me what a pivotal role the international media had played in focusing global attention on the old South African government. He insisted that it was the persistence of the press that had kept up the pressure on power that led to his release and the transition to a multi-ethnic democracy. Strong, courageous and honest reporting has been just as crucial in the post-apartheid years as journalists have strove to shine a spotlight into the murkiest crevices of the nation. Bold investigations have helped uncover the misdeeds of corruption, cronyism and state capture that have dogged South Africa's progress in the 21st century. Good, unshackled and unbiased journalism is essential to maintaining a working democracy. In this age of “fake news”, misinformation and weaponised social media, it often strikes me that good old-fashioned facts are left splattered like roadkill on the information super-highway. As Mark Twain once said, “A lie will travel halfway round the world while the truth is still pulling its boots on.” Science now confirms that false stories spread faster and more widely than real news. A recent study discovered that the truth takes six times longer than fake news to be seen by 1 500 people on Twitter. And falsehoods and conspiracy theories take a long time to debunk. The challenges to the mainstream media have never been bigger. The partiality and polarisation of opinion around the world has left discussion and debate running a poor second to dispute and confrontation. It's left people confused, caught in a place where it's hard to distinguish truths from lies. All too many listening only to an ‘echo chamber’ of ‘facts’ that fit their beliefs. Never has there been a greater need for trust, for strong, straight journalism that people can believe in.

Jeremy Thompson is one of the United Kingdom's most experienced and acclaimed television newsmen. He started as a journalist in newspapers and went on to spend over 40 years in network television news with the BBC, ITN and Sky News, reporting from every corner of the world. Jeremy ran foreign bureaux in Asia, Africa and America, covering many of the most important news stories of our times, including Tiananmen Square, the election of Nelson Mandela, 9/11, two Gulf Wars, the Balkan conflict, the Genocide in Rwanda, the War on Terror and the Indian Ocean Tsunami. He became Sky's early evening news anchor and pioneered presenting from the frontline for nearly two decades, winning many accolades, including three Emmys, three BAFTAs and the Royal Television Society's Presenter of the Year Award. Jeremy has now retired from full-time television news presenting. His very successful autobiography *Breaking News* is out in paperback.

